

FEATURE

# Hand revisits Ribbon Creek incident for Depot DIs

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*STAFF WRITER*

Retired 1st Lt. Jesse A. Hand, a former Parris Island drill instructor, spoke to RTR personnel at Traditions Jan. 28, about the events surrounding the Ribbon Creek incident and how it changed recruit training.

Hand was aboard the Depot primarily to attend his granddaughter's graduation, but, given his history with Parris Island, he was invited to speak during his visit.

Hand joined the Marine Corps in 1948 and served as a drill instructor in the same battalion as Matthew McKeon, the DI who led recruits on a night march through Ribbon Creek in 1956. Six recruits drowned on that march, forever-changing Marine Corps recruit training.

Hand was aboard the Depot on that fateful night, but wanted to begin his story a little further back in order for RTR personnel to understand recruit training as it existed before the incident.

Although it had been nearly 55 years since Hand first experienced Marine Corps recruit training, he recounted the events like it was yesterday, explaining that some aspects of recruit training have not changed.

"We were sitting on the train like little lost souls," he said. "A corporal boarded the train and starting screaming, 'Get off my train!' This was a little bit of a shock, even though we'd been told by other recruits what Parris Island was going to be like. If we'd really known, we would've gotten off that train on the other side and went back to Atlanta."

The first meeting between recruits and their drill instructor still remains the same to this day, according to Hand. He could still remember the first time he laid eyes on his senior drill instructor.

"He wasn't a very big man, by comparison," he said. "I was a lot taller than he was, but I thought at that time, he was the most dangerous-looking man I had ever met."

Like many recruits today, Hand explained that he and his fellow recruits went through two initial weeks of "shock and fear." This

did not last the entire cycle, however.

"It was all part of the master plan – the first two weeks they tear you down to nothing," he said. "After that, they start building you back up again. That's when we actually started learning something."

This master plan seems to still be in effect today, with the exception of the physical interaction that took place between the recruits and drill instructors.

Back then, Hand said that it was common practice for DIs to push, hit, kick and name-call recruits.

"They wanted to break you down emotionally," he said. "If you did anything wrong, you got a boot in the rear end. Drill instructors would sometimes run hard at a recruit and make him wet his trousers. That's how fearful we were of them."

By the end of the cycle, although his senior drill instructor had done his best to make Hand's and the rest of the recruits' lives miserable, they shared a respect for him unmatched by any they had ever known before.

"On the last day, he gathered us all around and said, 'From this day forth, never ever let another [per-



Cpl. Alisha R. Fitzgerald

**Retired 1st Lt. Jesse A. Hand, a former Parris Island drill instructor, speaks to RTR personnel at Traditions Jan. 28, about his boot camp experience, the Ribbon Creek incident and how recruit training changed when he was a DI. Hand worked in the same battalion as Matthew McKeon, the DI who led recruits from Platoon 71 into Ribbon Creek on April 8, 1956.**

son] talk to you or treat you like I have treated you these last three months. From this day forth, you're Marines, and I'd be happy to serve in combat with any one of you," he said. "At that point, I think we actually kind of loved our drill instructor."

When Hand returned to Parris Island in 1955 to work as a drill instructor, it was business as usual, with training being conducted in the same manner.

After completing DI School, he proceeded to train his recruits the same way his drill instructors had

trained him.

"That was kind of the name of the game," said Hand. "Touching a recruit had never been a big deal in those days, as long as you didn't do it in front of the colonel. It was a system that worked, and we got the end result we wanted."

While working as a senior drill instructor for 3rd RTBn. in March 1956, Hand picked up with Platoon 80, one week after McKeon had picked up with Platoon 71.

"McKeon was worried about his platoon," said Hand. "Although

he was not the senior drill instructor, he was worried that they were too lax. Some of the other drill instructors would call his platoon a herd."

On April 8, 1956, McKeon was drinking at the enlisted club while off duty.

"Having had a few drinks already, he went back to the platoon area, which was his biggest mistake," said Hand.

While there, McKeon filed the recruits out of the squadbay and told the duty drill instructor that he was taking them on a night march.

McKeon proceeded to lead the recruits toward what was then A-line and on into Ribbon Creek. That night, six recruits drowned.

The incident resulted in a complete overhaul of training guidelines. Drill Instructors were closely watched, and all had to find a new approach to their methods of training.

"Did DIs change right away?" asked Hand of the RTR personnel. "Not on your life. It took a good part of the next three years for the full transformation."

During this time, Hand said that many DIs were relieved of duty. Many acts that were not considered restricted before were now highly punishable.

"Just grabbing a recruit's jacket would get you in trouble," said Hand. "It was pretty severe, and it had to be severe."

Hand also had to overhaul his own methods, as well. After the transformation was complete, he could look back at the old ways and see the inappropriateness.

"It was not honorable, and it certainly was not a way to treat human beings," he said. "If you're a drill instructor today, your recruits may not necessarily remember that you taught them how to drill, that you taught them the history of the Marine Corps or its traditions. What they're going to remember is what kind of person you were."

The same goes for Hand and his experience as a recruit. He said some things he will never forget, and although things may have changed for the better, the end result was still the same – United States Marines.

"I can almost quote verbatim things my drill instructor said to me while I was in training," said Hand. "You remember the people that take you through that rite of passage into manhood called Marine Corps boot camp."

Hand received numerous awards for his service, including the Navy Commendation Medal for Valor and the Purple Heart. He currently resides with his wife in Orange Park, Fla., where he works as a real estate broker.